

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please cancel claims 18-23 without prejudice.

Please amend claims 1, 4 and 13 as follows:

1. (Currently Amended) A clamp comprising:

a handle assembly;

a gripping assembly having a pair of jaws that can be opened and closed to grip an element, the pair of jaws being parallel to each other when they are opened and when they are closed; [[and]]

a flexible shaft having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly; and

a rigid covering that can be positioned in a first position where the covering exposes a portion of the flexible shaft, and in a second position where the covering completely covers the flexible shaft.

2. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein the pair of jaws are parallel to each other at all times, including when the jaws are being opened and being closed.

3. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein the shaft is completely flexible without any external support, yet is capable of withstanding axial loads.

4. (Currently Amended) The clamp of claim 3, [further including a rigid element that can be placed in a first position where the rigid element supports the shaft in a manner where the shaft cannot be bent, and in a second position where a portion of the shaft can be bent] wherein the shaft can be bent when the rigid covering is in the first position and cannot be bent when the rigid covering is in the second position.

5. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, further including:

a cable carried within the shaft, the cable having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly; and

wherein the gripping assembly includes:

a jaw housing;

a cable terminator movably retained inside the jaw housing and securing the distal end of the cable; and

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a link that pivotably couples each jaw to the jaw housing.

6. (Original) The clamp of claim 5, wherein each link is also pivotably coupled to the cable terminator.

7. (Original) The clamp of claim 5, wherein each link is a first link, and further including a second link that pivotably couples each jaw to the jaw housing.

8. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein each jaw receives an insert, and wherein a space is defined between the insert on each jaw when the jaws are in the closed position.

9-12. (Canceled).

13. (Currently Amended) A clamp comprising:
a gripping assembly having a pair of jaws that can be opened and closed to grip an element;
a handle assembly for controlling the opening and closing of the jaws; and
a shaft assembly having:

a flexible shaft having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly; and

a rigid element having a proximal end that is removably coupled to the handle assembly, and a distal end that is removably coupled to the gripping assembly;

wherein the rigid element supports the shaft in a manner where the shaft cannot be bent when the proximal and distal ends are coupled to the handle assembly and the gripping assembly, respectively, and wherein the shaft can be bent when [either the proximal end or the distal end of] the rigid element is removed from [[either]] the handle assembly [[or]] and the gripping assembly[[, respectively]]; and

whereby the handle assembly continues to remain operable to control the opening and closing of the jaws when the rigid element is removed from the handle assembly and the gripping assembly.

2 14. (Original) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the handle assembly includes means for locking the pair of jaws in a closed position, the locking means having means for adjusting the locking force of the jaws.

3 15. (Original) The clamp of claim 14, wherein the handle assembly includes a first handle piece and a second handle piece, and the locking means includes:

a ratchet rack pivotally coupled to the first and second handle pieces, the ratchet rack having a tooth; and

a ratchet that is normally biased towards the ratchet rack, and having means for engaging the tooth on the ratchet rack.

4 16. (Original) The clamp of claim 15, wherein the adjusting means includes the engaging means, with the engaging means having an elongate member that has a helical groove that also defines a continuous path that includes a plurality of teeth, with the tooth of the ratchet rack adapted to engage the groove and to travel along the continuous path.

5 17. (Original) The clamp of claim 16, wherein the flexible shaft is capable of withstanding axial loads when the plurality of telescoping tubes is in the first position.

18-23. (Canceled).

6 24. (Original) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the jaws are non-rotational and are capable of supporting axial loads, side loads, moments, and torques.